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Britain to delay easing COVID-19 restrictions due to emergence of Delta variant

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People sit at outdoor tables at a restaurant in Soho, in London, England. Prime Minister Boris Johnson confirmed on Monday that the COVID-19 restrictions will remain in place in England until July 19. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are expected to follow suit.

ALBERTO PEZZALI/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Like many Canadians, people in Britain had been hoping for months that the country's rapid vaccination program would turn the tide on the COVID-19 pandemic and lead to a return of some kind of normalcy this summer.

But the emergence of the Delta variant, first detected in India, has given the pandemic renewed vigour and prompted the British government to delay lifting all remaining restrictions on social contacts. Instead of easing the measures on June 21 as planned, Prime Minister Boris Johnson confirmed on Monday that they will remain in place in England until July 19. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are expected to follow suit.

"Now is the time to ease off the accelerator," Mr. Johnson said during a press conference. "I think it is sensible to wait just a little longer."

The rise of the Delta variant has proven to be a cautionary tale in Britain, and scientists say it should serve as a warning for other countries that are almost certain to see a similar surge. "My thought is that it is somewhat inevitable that this variant would take off if introduced enough into a country," said Wendy Barclay, a virologist at Imperial College London.

Millions of people have been trapped in limbo by the world's two-speed COVID-19 recovery

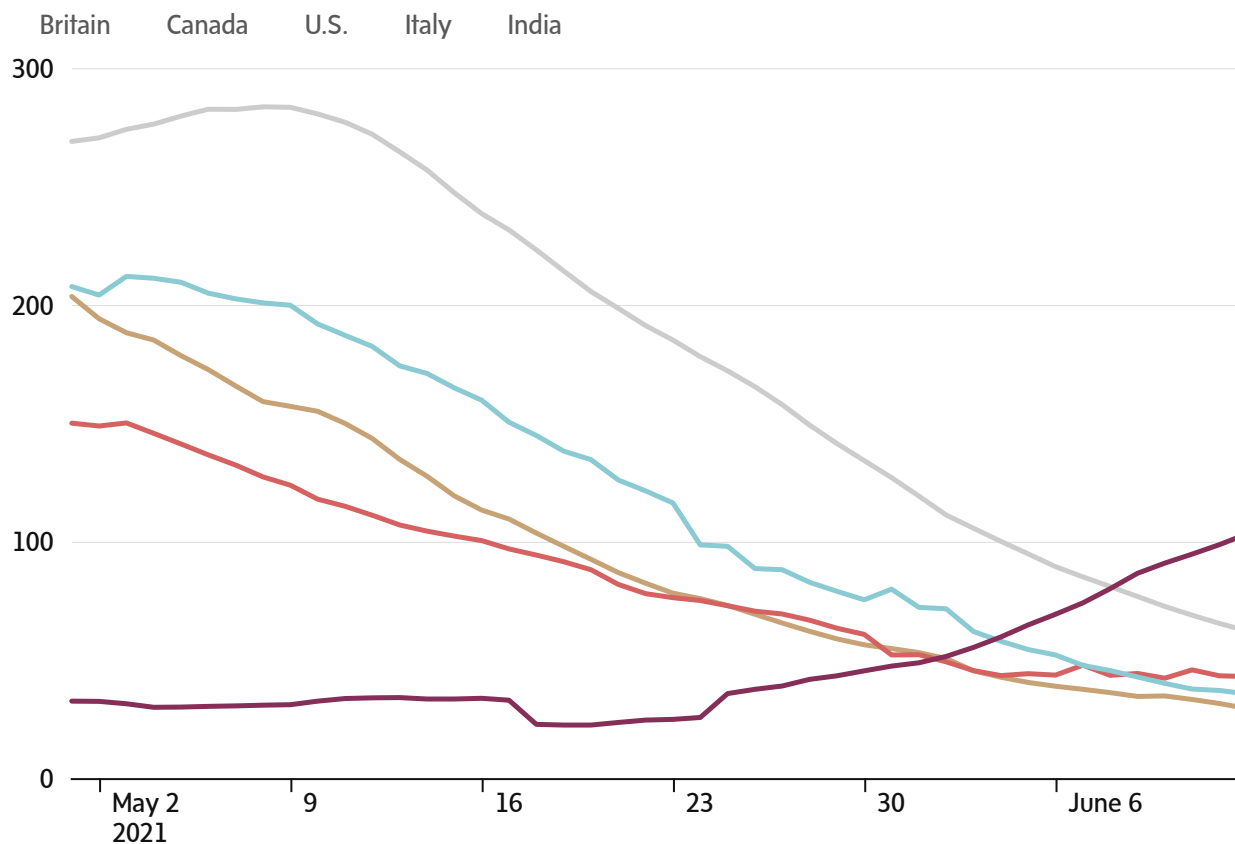
The British government had been counting on its rapid vaccination program to bring the pandemic under control, and for weeks infections had been falling sharply. Nearly 80 per cent of British adults have had one shot of vaccine and 57 per cent have had two, one of the highest immunization rates in the world.

The government grew confident enough that it began lifting restrictions on social movements in May, allowing pubs and restaurants to resume indoor service and reopening movie theatres and dozens of other venues.

When the Delta variant surfaced in April, health officials hoped the vaccination effort was far enough ahead of the virus to ward off any severe uptick in cases. But the rapid spread of the mutation caught almost everyone off guard.

Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people

Seven-day moving average



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Cases of the variant quickly began multiplying at a rapid rate and, by June 9, Public Health England said the total number of Delta infections had jumped to 42,323 from 12,431 in just seven days. The variant has moved across the country and now accounts for more than 90 per cent of all infections, overtaking the Alpha mutation, which originated in Britain last fall.

The alarming surge has pushed up the number of daily COVID-19 cases to the highest level in three months. On Monday, Britain reported 7,742 new infections, up 45 per cent in the past week. Hospital admissions have climbed 50 per cent, and while the death toll remains low – three deaths were reported Monday – it has also increased by 12 per cent in the past week.

During a recent briefing on the variant, Dr. Barclay said it has two key mutations that help the virus bind to cells in human air passages. “Alpha took one step toward improving that with a certain mutation and the Delta variant has built on that and taken a bigger step toward improving that feature,” she said.

Scientists say those genetic changes have made the Delta variant around 60-per-cent more contagious than Alpha, which in turn was 50-per-cent more transmissible than the original

version of the virus, which emanated from Wuhan, China. It also causes more hospitalizations and it's slightly better at evading vaccines, scientists add.

A study released Monday by a group of researchers in Scotland examined medical data from more than five million Scots and found that people infected with the Delta variant were nearly twice as likely to end up in hospital as those who contracted the Alpha mutation. "There is an 85-per-cent increase in risk of going into hospital if you've got the Delta variant compared to Alpha," said Chris Robertson, a professor of public-health epidemiology at the University of Strathclyde who co-wrote the study.

The research also found that two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine provided 79-per-cent protection against the Delta variant. That compared with 92 per cent against Alpha. Two shots of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine offered 60-per-cent protection against Delta compared with 73 per cent for Alpha.

"The bad news is we do appear to be able to show here that the Delta variant does increase the risk of hospitalization," said Jim McMenamin, the national COVID-19 incident director at Public Health Scotland. "However, what we are able to see from the information available to us is that our vaccines are still highly effective."

He and other health experts also pointed out that most hospitalizations involved younger people who have yet to be fully vaccinated. Those admitted to hospital were also recovering much faster than patients admitted during the previous wave of the pandemic last winter, Dr. Robertson added.

But experts say the link between rising cases and increased hospitalization hasn't yet been broken, despite massive vaccination.

"The link between people getting the infection and being hospitalized has been substantially weakened, a much smaller proportion of those infected are going into hospital, but it has not been completely stopped," Chris Whitty, Britain's Chief Medical Officer, said Monday. "While we do not think an immediate overwhelming of the [National Health Service] is likely, if this continues on an exponential path ... then we would run into trouble."

Public Health England offered more encouraging vaccine results on Monday. In a review of 14,000 cases, the PHE concluded that the Pfizer vaccine was 96-per-cent effective against the Delta variant after two shots and the AstraZeneca jab offered 92-per-cent protection.

Mr. Johnson is still counting on vaccinations winning the race against the virus. On Monday, he said that within a month everyone over the age of 18 will have received one shot and two-thirds of adults will have had two.

“By July 19 we do think that we will have built up a very considerable wall of immunity around the whole of the population,” he said. “At that stage, on the basis of the evidence that I can see now, I’m confident that we will be able to go forward with the full Step 4, the full opening.”

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